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MILTON'S *LYCIDAS* AND THE PLAY OF *BARNAVELT*

Critics of Milton seem to be rather generally agreed that, however much the poet may have drawn upon the treasures of thought in the writers of both ancient and modern times, and however close in some instances the resemblances may be between the work of the lender and the borrower, Milton can in no case be charged with downright plagiarism—a word for word transplanting that is unaccompanied by the transforming power of the poet's imagination and individuality. It is generally agreed that Milton transformed into his own whatever he touched, and that almost without exception he transformed it into an infinitely better thing than he found it.

It is, therefore, a most arresting experience to come across a word for word parallel that apparently belies the statement that Milton was never a downright plagiarist. Such a parallel occurs between a passage in *Lycidas* and one in *The Tragedy of Sir John van Olden Barnavelt* by Massinger and Fletcher. Lines 70-72 of *Lycidas* run as follows:

Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
(That last infirmity of noble mind)
To scorn delights and live laborious days.

In *Barnavelt*, Act I, scene 1 occurs the following speech of Barnavelt himself:

Yf I fall

I shall not be alone, for in my ruyns
My Enemies shall find their Sepulchres.
Modes-Bargen, though in place you are my equall,
The fire of honor, which is dead in you,
Burnes hotly in me, and I will preserve
Each glory I have got, with as much care
As I acheivd it. Read but ore the Stories
Of men most fam'd for courage or for counsaile,
And you shall find that the desire of glory
(That last infirmity of noble minds)
Was the last frailty wise men ere put of:
Be they my presidents.¹

¹ Bullen, *Old English Plays*, Vol. II, p. 213.

We have, then, in a context somewhat similar to that in *Barnavelt*, a line which, with the unimportant difference between "mind" and "minds," not only presents a word for word parallel, but even uses the parentheses. This double coincidence is, to say the least, very striking. The same sentiment, it has been noted, Milton expressed much later in *Paradise Regained*, Bk. III, lines 25 ff. Satan asks Christ why He should deprive himself of fame and glory

. . . glory, the reward
That sole excites to high attempts the flame
Of most erected spirits, most tempered pure
Aethereal, who all pleasures else despise,
All treasures and all gain esteem as dross,
And dignities and powers, all but the highest.

The resemblance between the *passages* in *Lycidas* and *Barnevelt* was noticed by Robert Boyle, who in Appendix II of Bullen's *Old English Plays* (Vol. II, p. 437) speaks in comment on the lines

The desire of glory
Was the last frailty wise men ere put off.

as follows: "This occurs again in *A Very Woman*, V, 4, line 10—

Though the desire of fame be the last weakness
Wise men put off.

Though the thought occurs in Tacitus and Simplicius, Milton seems to have adopted it, as he has done many other of his most striking passages from Massinger. It occurs also in at least one other play of Massinger's, but the passage has escaped me for the moment."

It is curious that Boyle should speak of the lines *preceding* and *following* the one in parentheses and not even hint at the much more striking parallel between the two lines thus identically set off. He was evidently not greatly concerned with more than the general resemblance of thought, if he was even aware of more.

We should expect editors and critics of Milton to have noticed the parallel. A careful examination, however, reveals no evidence that any commentator of Milton's *Lycidas* has even noticed the resemblance. It would of course not be noticed by Warton (1785), Todd (1826), Browne (1866), Masson (1874), Bradshaw (1877),

Jerram (1881), or the other editors before Jerram, since *Barnavelt* was never published until 1883, when it appeared in Vol. II of Bullen's *Old English Plays*. Since its publication, however, have appeared, among others, the editions of Verity (1898), Moody (1899), Sampson (1901), and Tuckwell (1911). In citing parallels or slight resemblances to the *Lycidas* line, many of these commentators merely quote from their predecessors. Altogether, from Warton to Tuckwell, we have citations from the following authors and works: Tacitus, Athenaeus, Abbate Grillo, Sir Henry Wotton, Bishop Hall, Feltham's *Resolves*, Jonson's *Cataline*, and Massinger's *A Very Woman*. But all of these furnish slight parallels indeed compared with the line from *Barnavelt*. It is thus evident that the parallel has not been mentioned where it should of all places be found—in the standard editions of *Lycidas*.

What, now, are the conceivable explanations of the parallel? *Lycidas* was written in the autumn of 1637 and published in 1638. *Barnavelt* was produced, according to Fleay, between August 14 and August 27, 1619. Sir John van Olden Barnavelt was executed May 13, 1619. The play was written, therefore, between May and August, 1619. There is no evidence of any subsequent production. The manuscript, a folio of thirty-one leaves, was purchased for the British Museum from the Earl of Denbigh in 1851 and is now entitled Brit. Mus. Add. Ms. 18, 653. Its history previous to the purchase in 1851 is unknown. It was first published by Bullen, as above indicated, in 1883. With these facts in mind, the four conceivable explanations of the parallel may be noted. First, that the parallel is a mere coincidence is not probable. Second, that both lines have a common source is more conceivable but still not very probable. Third, that Massinger copied Milton is not possible unless Massinger revised the play after 1638, and of this revision there is no evidence whatever. Fourth, that Milton copied Massinger is the most plausible explanation of all and, in the present state of our knowledge, the only acceptable one.

But, if we accept this last explanation, how did Milton get hold of the line from *Barnavelt*? In the absence of any known published version in Milton's time, he must either have seen the manuscript or witnessed the stage presentation. Accessibility to the manuscript would naturally, though not necessarily, require an acquaintanceship with one of the authors, and there is not the

slightest evidence, in Masson or anywhere else, that Milton had any relations with either Fletcher or Massinger. It is of course just possible that he may have had access to the manuscript through the medium of other persons. Our ignorance of the early history of the manuscript precludes our supporting or denying the supposition. But it would at least seem very improbable, considering Milton's slight relationship with the class of men who would be likely to have it in custody. The stage presentation he may possibly have known. But this is very improbable, since Milton was only eleven years old when *Barnavelt* was produced in 1619. And even conceding that he was allowed to frequent the theatres at this age, it is not very likely that he would have retained a line or a passage in his memory in this exact form from 1619 to 1637. The accessible commonplace books of his do not contain the line. And since we have no record of any subsequent production of the play, we must infer that he never saw it produced.

Finally, there is not the slightest allusion in Milton's poetry or prose to Barnavelt himself. The only allusion in his poetry to the political situation on the Continent that might be of significance occurs in the third Elegy, lines 10-11:

Et memini Heroum quos vidit ad aethera raptos,
Flevit et amissos Belgia tota duces.

But even this is of doubtful import. In short, as to Milton's knowledge of this particular play we have absolutely no evidence, and the parallel between *Lycidas* and *Barnavelt*, striking as it is, seems unexplainable in the light of the knowledge we now possess.²

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² The larger question, which this parallel of course suggests, of Milton's connections with the dramatic literature of England demands much more investigation than it has hitherto received. An investigation of the writer's, undertaken in connection with the study here reported and including a very careful examination of Milton's prose and poetry for allusions to the English drama, has led him to conclude that Milton's connections with the dramatic literature of England were very slight, and that his relations to the theatre itself seem practically negligible.